Network of grafting experts to conserve and utilize a local delicacy: pickle ( Appe midi) mango

Pickle mango, also known as *Appe midi* in Kannada, is considered a delicacy in the Central Western Ghats region of Karnataka. Locals consider it an essential part to every single meal where it is used as spice or preserved into jam or pickle. This distinctive fruit is bitter and sour with aromas so distinctive and variable that they can range from that of cumin seeds to that of camphor. Taste is embedded with local food culture and is appreciated very much. It is a major source of income for the rural landless poor who are still dependent on the collection of Appe fruits from the forest. Fifty years ago, the pickle mango (sub-type of *Mangifera indica*) was still undomesticated as people found enough trees in the forest for their needs. However, as the population grew, demand for the pickle mango increased. Sensing a potential market, Mr. Eshanna from the Amchimane village and other entrepreneurial farmers started to domesticate pickle mangoes.

It took decades of experimentation and mistakes for Mr. Eshanna to become an expert in pickle mango grafting as pickle mango grafting is more complicated than ordinary grafting. However, what started as a simple desire to grow pickle mangoes on the farm or backyard soon expanded into a community wide effort. This exchange could be their best fruits or new information about grafting techniques. Through this network, farmers were able to collectively identify the hundreds of varieties of pickle mangoes that exist in the forest. They verified the best trees and standardized grafting techniques. Expert grafters would graft pickle mangoes on their friends’ and families’ farmlands. Over the time, this process evolved from a social activity to an informal network of expert grafters who offer their expertise in grafting and maintaining pickle mangoes.

For Mr. Dattatreya Hegde from Salkani Village, this network is primarily a social activity. He refuses to be compensated for his travels. Grafting pickle mangoes on other farmer’s lands gives him the excuse to travel and visit friends. For Mr. Eshanna the pickle mango business makes up the bulk of his livelihood. He goes to a minimum of 100 orchards and home gardens a year and makes his living by training people and grafting pickle mangos. He has improved upon traditional knowledge and perfected several techniques. These informal networks are important as not only do they conserve the genetic resources for pickle mango, but they also conserve the knowledge about its flavours, multiple uses and tolerance against certain extreme weather conditions like drought or heavy rains during flowering. Growing pickle mangoes in orchards protects varieties that were in danger of becoming extinct in the wild. Varieties such as the Anantha Bhatta Appe and Malanji Appe have already been safely conserved on farms and the diversity of the home gardens and orchards has increased.
Despite their success and a growing demand, Mr. Eshanna feels as if he still has a long way to go. This network is currently confined to a few friends due to the lack of institutional support. “I’m worried about the future of pickle mangoes as overexploitation is on the rise.” He said. “More people need to focus on pickle mango conservation.” This network could teach villagers how to protect the forest from being degraded and grow pickle mango in their home gardens. Farmers have indicated their interest in scaling-up the production of preferred pickle mango types through this network of grafting experts. Due to the local cultural importance of pickle mango, they want to spread the use of appe mango in popular dishes to surrounding cities. Together, the farmers could make around 10,000 grafts every season and train 50 people to start growing pickle mango in their home gardens and orchards. The group of grafting experts could be the key to the spread of this local delicacy. This short story gives a good insight into the value of agricultural biodiversity, how it is maintained and used successfully in the field, and how it contributes to the livelihoods and well-being of many rural households. The UNEP/GEF funded project identified the efforts and role of these grafters as a ‘good practise of diversity management’ that is selected for further strengthening and dissemination.

(Compiled by Sarah Hom, Vasudeva Ramesh, Hugo Lamers, V Ramanatha Rao and Bhuwon Sthapit)

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